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ABSTRACT

Each child has a personal learning style that results from innate tendencies and environmental experiences. Because cultural groups often share common values, the experiences of children growing up with those values are reflected in their classroom learning behaviors. This paper discusses cultural differences in children's learning styles. The first part of the paper discusses research on the elements of learning style in general and the Onion Model framework of different learning style theories. The theory of multiple intelligences is considered, field dependent and field independent learning styles are reviewed, and the idea of left brain and right brain dominance is discussed. The second part of the paper examines learning styles particular to African-American, Asian-American, Hispanic, and European-American cultures, and reviews research pertaining to differences across cultures. Finally, the paper discusses results of a questionnaire on learning styles that was distributed to 19 elementary school teachers. Responses showed that teachers disagreed about whether culture affects learning style or whether differences in learning style are based on individual differences. The paper concludes with some general characteristics particular to certain cultures noted by the teachers. (Contains 15 references.) (JPB)

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IS THERE A DIFFERENCE IN LEARNING STYLE AMONG CULTURES?

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Abstract

The following paper discusses the topic of learning style. It attempts to determine whether or not there is a difference in learning style among different cultures. A general overview of learning styles will be given first. A description of the learning styles that different cultures possess will be discussed next. the specific cultures mentioned are African - American, Asian - American, Hispanic, and European American. Finally a description of a questionnaire given to 19 Catholic school teachers, in a culturally diverse elementary school, will be looked at briefly. It is important to keep in mind that this could be a controversial topic, and should be dealt with carefully and with consideration to the specific cultures mentioned.

CHILDREN'S LEARNING STYLES

The topic of learning styles is one that is of great interest to me. It is amazing how one can be faced with a class of students who all learn in different ways, at a different pace, and with different interests. Some children's weaknesses lie where other children's strengths are. As an educator it becomes a constant challenge to create and apply methods that will reach most or all of your students.

Each child has a personal learning style that results from innate tendencies and environmental experiences. In every culture and ethnic group, individuality is more common than any general pattern. But because cultural groups often share common values, the experiences of children growing up with those values are reflected in their classroom learning behaviors (Jackson, 1996, p.68). The underlying philosophy of learning styles research is based on three major premises: all students can learn, students learn differently, and students learn better when they are taught in their specific learning style (Sandhu, 1995, p.159). Most definitions of learning style focus on individual differences that influence learning in classroom situations (Dembo, 1991, p.70). As cited by Dembo, Keefe states that learning styles are cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment (1991, p.79).

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According to Griggs, everyone has a learning style. Our style of learning, if accommodated, can result in improved attitudes toward learning and an increase in productivity, academic achievement, and creativity (1991, p.3).

Elements of Learning Style

There has been a great deal of research done on learning styles. Research done by Dunn, Griggs, and Price defined learning styles in terms of reactions to 22 elements including (a) the classroom *environment* (sound - such as music - versus quiet; bright or soft illumination; warm versus cool temperatures; and conventional desk and chair seating versus informal easy chairs); (b) *emotionally* (motivation, persistence, responsibility, and structure); (c) *sociological preferences* (learning alone, in a pair, with peers, in a team, with an authoritative versus collegial adult, and needing variety versus patterns or routines); (d) *physiological strengths* (auditory, visual, kinesthetic memory, intake - the need for snacks or liquid while learning, time - of - day energy levels, and the need for mobility versus passivity); and (e) *processing inclinations* (global versus analytic, hemisphericity, and impulsive versus reflective) (1993, p.238). The research of Dunn, Griggs, and Price also has shown that (a) individuals learn in ways significantly different from each other; (b) students achieve statistically higher test and attitude scores when they are taught with approaches and resources that complement, rather than antagonize their learning style; and (c) educators are able to recognize only a few elements of their students' learning styles through observation; other elements are identifiable solely through administration of a learning style test (1993, p.238). One learning style test is The Learning Style Inventory, known as the LSI. The LSI has been used in research conducted at more than 90 institutions of higher education in the United States. Developed through content and factor

analysis, the LSI is a comprehensive approach to the identification of an individual's learning style and has "established impressive reliability and validity" (Kirby, 1979, p.72 as cited by Dunn, 1993, p.239). Of the 22 learning style variables, 7 or 8 consistently predicted differences between high and low achievers. These variables included: motivation, persistence, responsibility, perceptual strengths, and time of day (Dunn, 1993, p.239). Typically, high achievers were more motivated, persistent, and responsible (conforming) than were underachievers, and they learned through their auditory senses, visual senses, or both; they also tended to be early - morning preferents (Dunn, 1993, p.239).

The Onion Model

Curry (1987), as cited by Griggs, attempted to provide a framework for the growing number of different learning style theories, called the "onion model" (1991, p.3). It consisted of four layers: personality dimensions assess the influences of basic personality on preferred approaches to acquiring and integrating information. Models stressing personality include Witkin's (1954) construct of field dependence/field independence and the Myers - Briggs Type Indicator with dichotomous scales measuring extroversion versus introversion, sensing versus intuition, thinking versus feeling and judging versus perception (Griggs, 1991, p.3).

Information - Processing is the individual's preferred intellectual approach to assimilating information, and includes Schmeck's (1983) construct of cognitive complexity and Kolb's (1984) model of information processing (Griggs, 1993, p.3)

Social Interaction addresses how students interact in the classroom and includes Reichmann's and Grasha's (1974) types of learners: independent, dependent, collaborative, competitive, participant, and avoidant (Griggs, 1991, p.3).

Multidimensional and instructional preference address the individual's preferred environment for learning and encompass The Human Information Processing Model (Keefe, 1989) and Learning Style Model of Dunn and Dunn (1978), as mentioned above. These models are similar because they stress the importance of identifying and addressing individual differences in the learning process (Griggs, 1991, p.3).

The Multiple Intelligences

Another theory on learning styles is Howard Gardner's theory on the Multiple Intelligence's. A unit of study designed by practitioners who hold Gardner's theory to be true would allow children to experience a concept or skill in a variety of ways and demonstrate their learning and understandings by using their strong suits and by being challenged to develop their ability in areas identified for more emphasis and improvement (Burchfield, 1996, p.6). Altogether there are seven intelligence's. The seven intelligence's are the seven ways in which people can learn, that have been identified so far. The seven intelligence's are: verbal/linguisitc intelligence - a preference to write, speak, read, and tell jokes; logical/mathematical intelligence - a preference to solve problems, question, do calculators, and experiment; visual/spatial intelligence - a preference to paint, draw, read maps, amd make patterns and designs; bodily/kinesthetic intelligence - a preference to dance, exercise, move around a lot, and play sports; musical/rhythmic intelligence - a preference to sing, listen to music, tap feet, and play instruments; and personal intelligence's - known as interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence's. Interpersonal is a preference to work in groups, mediate, present demonstrations and sense others' moods and feelings. Intrapersonal is a preference to think deeply, set goals, daydream,

and be alone (Gardner, 1983,p.73 - 237; Learning 1995). Based on the work of Howard Gardner, many researchers now agree that students have at least seven different ways they can learn. Each student possesses all seven of these learning pathways but some are better developed than others (Gardner, 1983, p.73 -237; Learning 1995, p.53). New research shows that different learning styles are stronger at different stages. According to a study done by Dr. Sue Teele, children do not learn the same way at every stage. Verbal/linguistic intelligence is at its strongest in kindergarten through third grade, then declines dramatically. Logical/mathematical intelligence and bodily/kinesthetic intelligence remain dominant throughout elementary school. This means that presenting information through visual, active learning experiences works best in the elementary grades. Middle - school children show strong preferences for bodily/kinesthetic, visual/spatial, musical/rhythmic, and interpersonal intelligence's. This means the way students learn best in middle - school may be the exact opposite of the way they are taught. These students are likely to do better working together than they do working alone (Learning, 1995, p.53).

Field Dependent/Field Independent Style

Two predominant learning styles that are continuously noted in research on this topic are field dependent amd field independent styles. A field independent learner is usually more task oriented, has well developed analytical abilities, is motivated by individual competition and achievement, perceives the specific then the totality, can work well alone, and is not affected as much by outside stimuli such as the instructor or the environment when solving a problem or performing a task (Jiminez, 1983, p.17). The field dependent learner works well in groups, perceives the totality then the specific, is motivated by group competition and achievement, is

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more affected by outside stimuli such as the instructor or the environment when solving a problem or performing a task, and is influenced more by affective variables in learning (Jiminez, 1983, p.17).

Left Brain Versus Right Brain Theory - Convergent Versus Divergent Theory

Finally, two more areas of learning styles that have been studied are, left - brain versus right - brain processing and convergent/divergent thinking. Left - brain / right - brain processing pertains to an individual's supposed preference for processing information and solving problems using different parts of the brain. The right side of the brain has been identified as the more intuitive side, whereas the left side is more the logical side. The left side focuses on such domains as speech, abstraction, logic, reading, and mathematics. The right side focuses on emotion, innovation, creativity, intuition, and spatial relationships (Dembo, 1991, p.86).

As cited by Dembo (1991, p.87), Guilford distinguished between convergent and divergent thinking. Convergent thinking produces a well - determined answer to a routine problem, whereas divergent thinking generates new ideas and solutions to problems that have more than one correct answer. Some students are better at divergent tasks than convergent tasks and vice versa, while some students are strong in both types of thinking (Dembo, 1991, p.87).

CULTURE AND CHILDREN'S LEARNING STYLE

When considering all the different types of learning styles, one must also consider culture. Diverse cultures exhibit different learning styles than "American" students. This paper

will attempt to research and explain the various learning styles among several different cultures. Traditional U.S. students, mostly from European cultures, have different preferences for learning environments than do their counterparts who belong to diverse ethnic backgrounds (Sandhu, 1995, p.159). Certainly, all children within a given culture don't learn the same way. Yet when children are described by people within the culture, some general learning patterns are identified as a result of shared cultural experience (Jackson, 1996, p.69).

The diversity of the cultural backgrounds of students in American schools and the low academic achievement of many of these students require greater understanding of how cultural factors may influence educational achievement (Dembo, 1991, p.89). Proponents of cultural differences point to the disparity between the students' home and school culture and the difficulties that minority students have in adjusting to a classroom with different social interactions, linguistic, and cognitive styles (Dembo, 1991, p.90). Our ability to give every child a chance to succeed in school depends upon a full understanding of culture and learning (Guild, 1994, p. 16).

African - American students are often described as being physically active, valuing verbal experience, and placing an importance on personal relationships. Hispanic students are often described as being comfortable with cognitive relationships and placing the importance of the group above that of the individual. Asian - American students are often described as being serious and valuing accuracy and objective content. Native - American students are often described as having acute visual discrimination and skills in the use of imagery. Anglo students are often described as being independent, analytical, and somewhat competitive (Jackson, 1996, p.68).

Although the relationship between culture and learning style is an important one, it can sometimes be controversial. One reason for this is that generalizations about a *group* of people have often led to naive inferences about *individuals* within that group. Although people connected by culture do exhibit a characteristic pattern of style preferences, it is a serious error to conclude that all members of the group have the same style traits as the group taken as awhole (Guild, 1994, p.17).

A second source of controversy is the understandable sensitivity surrounding attempts to explain the persistent achievement differences between minority and non - minority students - it is all too easy to confuse descriptions of differences with explanations for deficits (Guild, 1994, p.17).

Finally, the relationship between learning styles can be controversial because it brings us face to face with philosophical issues that involve deeply held beliefs (Guild, 1994, p.17).

In general, researchers have reported three kinds of information about culture and learning style. The first is the set of *observation - based descriptions of cultural groups of learners.* Minority students' learning styles are often contrasted with European - American students' ways of learning and the school practices designed from such students (Guild, 1994, p.18)

A second way we know about the links between culture and learning style is *data - based descriptions of specific groups.* In this class of inquiry, researchers administer learning style/cognitive style instruments to produce a profile of a cultural group, compare this group with another previously studied one (usually white Americans), or validate a particular instrument for cross - cultural use (Guild, 1994, p.18).

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The third way we know about the relationship of learning and culture is through *direct discussion.* Shade (1986), as cited by Guild, comments that: perceptual development differs within various ethnocultural groups. It is, therefore, an erroneous assumption in the teaching - learning process to assume children "see" the same event, idea, or object in the same way (1994, p.18). Cognitive style research, Ramirez (1989), as cited by Guild, believes could help accommodate children who see things differently. The research findings he notes, provide "a framework to look at and be responsive to diversity within and between cultures" (1994, p.18).

Bennett (1986), as cited by Guild, warns that ignoring the effects of culture and learning styles would depress learning among non mainstream students: if classroom expectations are limited by our own cultural orientations, we impede successful learners guided by another cultural orientation. If we only teach according to the ways we ourselves learn best, we are also likely to thwart successful learners who may share our cultural background but whose learning styles deviate from our own (1994, p.18).

Those who study culture and those who study learning styles generally agree on at least five points: educators concur that *students of any particular age will differ in their ways of learning,* most researchers believe that *learning styles are a function of both nature and nurture,* research on cultures, one consistent finding is that, *within a group the variations among individuals are as great as their commonalties,* and finally, many authors *acknowledge the cultural conflict between some students and the typical learning experiences in schools* (Guild, 1994, p.19).

Guild also notes debates about applying theory on culture and learning styles. First, people differ on *whether educators should acquire more explicit knowledge about particular*

cultural values and expectations. Cox and Ramirez (1981), as cited by Guild note that the "concept of cognitive or learning styles of minority and other students is one easily oversimplified, misunderstood, or misinterpreted (1994, p.19)

Authors also debate the *proper response to the fact that the culture/learning style relationship affects student achievement.* Evidence suggests that students with particular learning style traits (field - dependent, sensing, extraversion) are underachievers in school, irrespective of their cultural group (Guild, 1994, p.20).

Another unresolved issue is *how teachers working from their own cultures and teaching styles can successfully reach diverse populations. How cultural identity and self - esteem are related* remains an open question too. An acceptance of learning style demands an approach that develops skills through strengths (Guild, 1994, p.20).

Perhaps the most weighty of the application issues has to do with ways to *counteract our tendency toward instructional pendulum swings.* We are always seeking one right way to teach, and when we accumulate evidence that a strategy is effective with some students, we try to apply it to every student in every school (Guild, 1994, p.20)

Ideas about culture and learning style can be of great help to teachers as they pursue such intentional instructional diversity. A teacher who truly understands culture and learning style and who believes that all students can learn, one way or another, can offer oppotunitites for success to all students (Guild, 1994, p.21).

While the culture/leatrning style relationship is deceptively simple and the issues surrounding it are complex, it is a crucially important idea to contemplate. As we try to accommodate students' cultural and learning differences, it is most important to deeply value

each person's individuality. Using information about culture and learning styles in sensitive and positive ways will help educators value and promote diversity in all aspects of the school (Guild, 19954,p.21).

This research will attempt to explore the learning styles of African - American students, Asian - American students, Hispanic students, and European - American students.

African - American Students

The first group of children I would like to discuss are African - American children. According to research done by Burgess (1996, p.211), African - American children are people oriented, view things in their entirety, prefer inferential reasoning, prefer novelty, personal freedom, and distinctiveness, are not word - dependent but are proficient in both verbal and non - verbal communication, prefer oral/aural modalities for learning and communicating, use internal cues for problem soling, and rely on situation context for interpreting meaning.

Griggs and Dunn found similar results in their research. According to Griggs and Dunn, African - American students are global or field - dependent rather than analytic or field - independent processing styles - except for middle or upper class high achievers; have a tendency to rank low in the cognitive skill areas of analytic, sequential processing, and spatial/rotational pattern recognition and high in the cognitive skill areas of global, holistic processing in comparison with other ethnic groups - with the exception of Native Americans; prefer soft light, quiet, warm temperatures, and informal design while learning; are peer learners who reject

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instructional variety in favor of patterns and routines, are highly parent and teacher motivated, and require kindly, authoritative teachers present while learning; are afternoon and evening preferents for peak concentration times - with only occasional morning preferences; have a preference for intake and mobility; and many visual - kinesthetic learners who reject learning - by - listening but want to talk and move as they learn and prefer kinesthetic and tactual instructional resources (Griggs and Dunn, 1997, p.41).

The classroom that accommodates and is responsive to the African - American child is one that stresses the importance of children working with and getting along with other children, children being responsible for themselves and other children, and children respecting themselves and other children (Burgess, 1996, p.213).

Hispanic Students

The next group of students I would like to discuss are Hispanic children. Sociologists identify Hispanics in three groups: *traditional* - maintaining close ties with native cultural customs and traditions; *dualistic* - maintaining native cultural customs but adopting some of the dominant culture and values; *assimilated* - not maintaining native culture but adopting primarily the dominant culture and values (Jiminez, 1983, p.16). It is important to keep in mind that the Hispanic culture consists of many denominations. The particular Hispanic groups in this paper are Puerto Rican and Dominican.

Research on the learning styles of Hispanic - Americans in particular is limited. According to Jiminez (1983), Hispanic - American learners tend to prefer a field dependent learning style if they were from very traditional Hispanic families (p.17). Within the Latino

groups the majority of studies have been focused on the learning styles of Mexican - American elementary school children (Griggs & Dunn, 1996, p.1). Mexican - American children prefer an environment with cool temperature and formal design. They require a high degree of structure. Mexican - American children also prefer to learn in groups. Mexican - American students also appear to be field dependent learners (Griggs & Dunn, 1996, p.2).

Many Mexican - American children experience language difficulty which affects the learning process unfavorably, resulting in a poor self - concept (Dunn, Griggs, & Price, 1993, p.240). Dunn, Griggs, and Price also found that Mexican - American students preferred learning new or difficult information in the afternoon rather than in early or late morning (1993, p.240). According to research done by Sims (1988), as cited by Dunn, Griggs, and Price, Mexican - American students score low on responsibility scores. They tend to be parent motivated rather than teacher motivated. They require little mobility and want few kinesthetic instructional activities (1993, p.240).

Asian - American Students

As with the Hispanic culture, the Asian - American culture also consists of many denominations. The group I will focus on are the Korean and Filipino students. The core values of the groups include diligence, harmony, taking responsibility, respect for authority, emphasis on education, respect for elders, family loyalty, self- discipline, and self - reflection (Lee, 1995, p.5)

Asian - Americans do not prefer quiet while working, they prefer cooler temperatures, prefer conventional seating while learning, are less peer - oriented, do not prefer morning as a

time for learning, prefer an authority figure present, and learn in several ways (Griggs & Dunn, 1997, p.39).

European - American Students

According to Griggs and Dunn (1997, p.37), European Americans prefer bright lighting, are auditory learners, and prefer formal design and structure. According to research done by Sandhu, (1995, p.159), European Americans prefer competitive learning environments, prefer individual study, increase distance when communicating, have a communication style that is more rigid and formal, express emotions selectively, adhere to rigid time schedules, task completion takes primacy, analytical style is more appropriate, and process relevant or irrelevant information efficiently.

You will notice that more research has been done on the learning styles of African - Americans and Hispanics as opposed to Asian - Americans and European - Americans.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire on learning styles among different cultures was distributed to 19 teachers, including myself, who work in a Catholic elementary school in the Bronx. The questionnaire was distributed in an attempt to get the opinions of teachers on whether or not there is a significant difference in learning styles among different cultures. The socio - economic status of the area is lower - middle class. The cultural make - up of the school is very diverse. Each class has a very culturally diverse enrollment. Some of the cultures represented are: African - American, Irish - American, Asian - American, and Hispanic. Hispanic, of Puerto

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- Rican descent, is the dominant culture of the school and the community. There are three kindergarten classes and two of each grade thereafter. Each grade consists of 25 - 40 students. The cultures represented among the teachers are Irish - American, Italian - American, Polish - American, and German - American.

The questionnaire contained 22 statements which had to be answered on a scale from 1 - 5. #1 - "strongly disagree", #2 - "disagree", #3 - "neutral", #4 - "agree", and #5 - "strongly agree". The statements used in the questionnaire were based on facts taken right form the literature review. There were five - seven statements on each of the four cultural groups represented in this paper.

The majority of the teachers seemed to disagree with the fact that there is a distinct difference in learning styles among different cultures. Most teachers seemed to think that learning style is an "individual" preference. However, some learning style characteristics among cultures did seem to stick out. Forty - eight percent of the teachers questioned, seem to agree that Hispanic students enjoy working in groups. Fifty - two percent of the teachers agree that Asian - American students are not peer oriented and prefer to work alone. Thirty - seven percent of the teachers agree that European - American students prefer a competitive learning environment.

The highest percentages in the questionnaire seemed to fall in the "neutral" category. The majority of teachers noted that they never really noticed whether or not certain culture prefer bright lights, cool temperatures, certain times of day, or quiet.

One teacher made a very interesting point. This particular teacher has been in the field for 26 years, so she has experienced many different children from many different cultures. She

seemed to think that economic status plays a significant role in learning style preference. She pointed out, for example, that if a child comes from a small apartment where many family members reside together, the child will be accustomed to learning in an environment where there is most likely noise, informal design, and a lot of group study. However, if a child comes from a house where he/she has his/her own room, the child will probably be accustomed to working in quiet and calm. It seems to me that this teacher has a very valid point.

The participants were very cooperative and informative in giving their answers. Some did suggest, however, that this could be a very controversial topic, due to the fact that it could be considered racial or discriminatory.

Concluding Statement

It seems difficult to simply agree with the fact that children from different cultures have different learning styles. As educators, I think it's very important to be aware of the different characteristics that certain culture possess. Besides being aware, I also feel you need to be flexible and comfortable with presenting material in the classroom in a variety of different ways in order to accommodate various learning styles. From my own experience, it seems that all children possess different styles of learning. I agree with the results from the questionnaires, that learning style is more an individual preference than a cultural group preference. I've seen African - American student who possess the same learning styles as their European - American counterparts. It seems that children in general have different styles of learning. As educators I do not think it is wise, to teach under the assumption that a certain cultural group needs to be taught in a certain way. Take for example the statement " African - American students prefer

soft light, quiet, and warm temperatures while learning". Suppose a teacher is given a class that is predominantly African - American; is the teacher supposed to provide an environment that is only and all of these things? I'm sure there would be children who would not achieve. A good educator notices students for who they are individually, not as a group. One must take great caution in assuming something, just because of culture. As I said previously, awareness is very important. Being aware of the "whole" child is an important aspect of teaching. Knowing and understanding a child's culture, is an important part of knowing the "whole" child.

Therefore, the statements about different cultures' learning style preferences should be used only for an awareness, and not as a guideline for a way a specific culture should be taught. Using this information as a guideline would really limit what should go on in a classroom.

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